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Understanding Varieties of English

A study about 9th grade pupils' ability to understand English accents.

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Abstract

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Abstract: Due to the increase in globalization understanding different varieties of English has become vital in order to be able to communicate with people and understand public announcements while abroad. In the curricula Lpo94 and Lgr11, there are goals regarding the understanding of regional varieties of English, which the pupils should have attained by the 9th year of compulsory school. The aim of this study was to see if and to what extent the pupils of a class in the 9th grade understand five different but common varieties of English. The pupils got to listen to audio tracks with speakers of the different varieties, which were South African English, Australian English, Indian English, Scottish English and African-American Vernacular English and then the pupils got to fill out a questionnaire about their understanding of the different varieties. The results show that a majority of the pupils had no problem understanding the accents even though they found some of the accents more difficult to understand than others. The conclusion of this study is that the participating pupils do understand regional varieties of English to a large extent and therefore have attained the goals in the curriculum regarding the understanding of regional speech of English.

Keywords: English accents and dialects, language variety, compulsory school, 9th grade, Lpo94, Lgr11, South African English, Australian English, Indian English, Scottish English, AAVE

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Appendix 1: Accents and dialects questionnaire

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

There are more than one billion people in the world that are able to speak English, which means that there is a high probability that one should have to use English sooner or later. Moreover, due to the increase in globalisation, understanding different languages, dialects and accents has become vital. In order to be able to understand instructions at an airport for example, or communicate with foreigners nowadays people have to be prepared for encountering different types of English. That is why it is important to introduce various Englishes early on in school in order to familiarise the pupils with the fact that there are several types of regional dialects and accents.

A definition of the term accent is a feature of pronunciation differences, while the term dialect refers not only to pronunciation differences but also to grammatical and vocabulary features. In other words, a dialect speaker is likely to have an accent but a speaker with an accent does not necessarily have a dialect (Crystal, 1995).

Because of the number of varieties of English as a native language, ENL, around the world a foreign learner who is only exposed to one ENL variety might not be equipped to cope with other varieties of ENL when encountered with them (Trudgill & Hannah, 2008). That is one of the reasons for carrying out this study, to see if the pupils are comfortable with different varieties of English.

According to the current curriculum in Sweden, Lpo94, and the curriculum to be, Lgr11, one of the goals that the pupils should have attained by the end of the ninth year in school is the ability to understand clear speech even though regional in nature.

Pupils should

– understand clear speech, even though regional in nature, in instructions, narratives and descriptions concerning familiar conditions and their own areas of interest

(Lpo 94, Skolverket)

Listen and read – receptive skills

Pupils should be able to understand

- Spoken English and texts from various media types
- Regional and social variations of spoken English
- Oral and written instructions and descriptions
- Various forms of conversations, dialogues, interviews and oral presentations

(My translation)

(Lgr 11, Skolverket)

These extracts from the two curricula show clearly that understanding spoken English, in various forms, is something that the English teaching in Sweden focuses on as one of the most important abilities in the process of learning English.

1.2 Aim and scope

The aim of this study is to see if and to what extent pupils in the ninth grade, the last year of compulsory school, actually have attained the goals regarding the understanding of regional speech or not. To do so, I have chosen to use a few different but common accents to see if the pupils are able to understand what is said in the accent and if they are able to distinguish any pronunciation differences compared to the English they prefer to use. For the sake of keeping the study fairly short but still interesting enough, I have chosen to use five accents from different parts of the world. Not only is it important for pupils to understand different accents and dialects for the sake of the curriculum but rather in order to succeed in communicating in English. Moreover, the five accents chosen are accents with many speakers and that the pupils are likely to encounter sooner or later, both in the media and in real life.

It would be interesting to conduct a study with more participating pupils due to the actual conclusions that might be drawn from a bigger study, but due to a limited time schedule there will only be time for one 9th grade class.

1.3 Materials and method

The materials used in this study were a specially compiled CD containing five audio tracks with people speaking with regional dialects or accents and a questionnaire to match. The accents and dialects used are South African English, Australian English, Indian English, Scottish English and African-American Vernacular English, AAVE. The audio tracks were collected from The International Dialects of English Archive, IDEA, and then cut into shorter pieces, between 40-120 seconds long. In one of the tracks the word ‘slave’ was deliberately left out since that word would make it obvious where the accent was from.

The audio tracks were chosen from a few criteria, for example that the speech should be understandable but still authentic and there had to be some sort of story that the pupils found fairly interesting. The story ‘Comma gets a cure’ is specially composed for studies on accents and dialects. Due to the choice of words in the story a researcher on dialects is able to examine the reader’s pronunciation of English, because of certain phonemic varieties the reader might use. That is why I chose to use that particular story.

After a brief run-through of the content of the questionnaire the audio tracks were played in a classroom situation. Each audio track was played twice and the pupils were asked to simply listen during the first playback and were given a few minutes to answer five questions to each audio track afterwards. The questions regarded not only their understanding of that particular accent or dialect but also if they were able to tell wherein the difference lies between the accent or dialect they heard and the accent they normally use. The pupils were then asked to rank how difficult the accents and dialects were to understand on a scale from 1 - 5, where 1 indicates ‘easy’ and 5 indicates ‘hard’. They were also asked to write where they thought the accent or dialect was from. After a few minutes the same audio track was played once more and the pupils were then given the time they needed to finish answering the questions of the questionnaire. (see Appendix 1).

Three of the audio track speakers actually told the same story but in three different parts. The story was called ‘Comma gets a cure’ and was about a veterinary nurse who tried to find a proper treatment for a goose named Comma. The reasons why I chose to use the story in three different parts were partly because it had a story that could easily be divided into three separate parts but also because of the speakers, who read the stories with clearly definable dialect characteristics. The other two audio track speakers talked about their everyday life very briefly.

It should be said that all people speak differently, even those belonging to the same accent or dialect. That is why speakers with broader, but still understandable accents were chosen so as to make each accent distinguishable. However, the accents chosen were of the type the pupils are likely to come across in the future and not simply random selections.

There are a total of 18 participants in this study, all of them from a 9th grade class, in other words they all are around the age of 15. The participants were informed that no names were to be used and that they therefore would remain anonymous.

The data from the questionnaires (see Appendix 1) was then put together. First of all, in order to see how much the pupils understood from each audio track secondly, how difficult each accent was to understand and thirdly, if the pupils were able to recognise where the different accents were from. Any unanswered questions were disregarded, all quotes used are authentic and uncorrected and all the numbers mentioned are exact.

1.4 Plan of study

The first chapter of this essay contains the background to this study and also how the study was conducted. Previous research is presented in chapter two. In chapter three the five different accents are described highlighting a few of their main pronunciation characteristics. In chapter four the results of the study are presented as well as an overall discussion about

them. The last chapter, chapter five, contains a summary of the essay, suggestions for future research, pedagogical implications as well as the conclusion of the study.

2. Previous Research

One of the most important things in order to achieve successful language communication is the ability to understand what other people are saying, in other words, speech (Öman, 2001). Listening comprehension is not just something that solely has an important function in language teaching in schools. Rather, the ability to understand spoken language, formal or colloquial, is vital in order to be able to communicate with others or understand public announcements, for example at an airport or train station. According to Hedge (2000), using recordings for English language learners where speech is carefully pronounced Received Pronunciation, RP, at a slow pace with grammatically correct sentences is not sufficient in English language teaching. The effect of this kind of teaching might be that the English language learners will only understand RP, which is an accent very few native English speakers actually use (Trudgill & Hannah, 2008). Furthermore, Hedge writes that spoken language is not as perfect as the examples used in language teaching. Spoken language contains incomplete sentences, pauses, repetitions, false starts and corrections and is also less formal and contains contracted forms, for example *I've*, *you're*, *she's*, and colloquial expressions not to mention the plentiful varieties of accents. Hedge suggests that more authentic speech should be used in language teaching but to the proper extent, in other words, making sure that the speech used is on a level suitable for the language learners (Hedge, 2000). This is all very well and probably something every language teacher would agree with but it is difficult to draw any general conclusions from Hedge's statements due to the fact that her book is not written for or based on the Swedish school system. Is it possible for Hedge to state how English as a second/foreign language is normally taught, or how it should be

treated? This raises the question whether a book like Hedge's is adequate for teacher students anywhere in the world when the circumstances for language learning and teaching are so very different depending on where in the world it takes place. A book equivalent to Hedge's but based on English learning and teaching in Sweden and the Swedish steering documents would be far more fruitful for future English teachers.

A study comparing listening materials from two different textbooks, one from 1994 and one from 2003, showed that in the more recent textbook the number of English varieties used was bigger than in the older textbook (Eggert, 2007). However, in both textbooks the majority of the listening materials were still in RP, or General American, GA, although the focus on other varieties in the listening materials is currently gaining ground (Eggert, 2007).

According to Trudgill & Hannah (2008), the English used by native speakers does not necessarily have to be the model for learners of English and should not be the model of speech that learners of English as a second language aim for, since their own variety of Standard English would be more sensible to use due to the certain phonology and vocabulary that fits their culture and society (Trudgill & Hannah, 2008).

There is not much research on the subject whether pupils in the Swedish schools actually understand different varieties of English or not. However, there are several essays written about the attitudes towards different varieties of English. Sahlström (2005), conducted a study about upper secondary students' attitudes to and assessment of four women speaking four different varieties of English and Tioukalias (2010) did a survey about twelve English teachers' attitudes towards Standard English and General American. Tioukalias found that the English teachers preferred Standard English but she also noticed that the teachers' attitude towards the General American variety was slowly changing to a more accepting state than before. If the teachers starts to accept more varieties of English it will hopefully have an effect on their teaching which in turn might open up the pupils' eyes to more varieties of English.

3. Accents and dialects

3.1 Accent and dialect overview

Countries with a relationship to the English language are usually divided into three groups, those with English as their native language (ENL) are referred to as ‘Inner Circle’ countries, for example Australia, Great Britain and USA to name a few. The countries where the people have another language than English as their mother tongue but where English still has an institutionalised status are called ‘Outer Circle’ countries, in which the speakers have English as their second language (ESL), for instance, India, Singapore and Kenya. The third group consists of countries where English is taught as a foreign language (EFL), that is basically only used for communicating with foreigners, for example Brazil, China and Sweden. Countries like these belong to the ‘Expanding Circle’ (Trudgill & Hannah 2008)

In spite of being thousands of miles apart the Englishes of the southern hemisphere, for instance in South Africa and Australia, have many similarities. There are very few regional varieties of their Standard Englishes compared to the number of regional varieties of English found on the British Isles. In South Africa, regional variation is somewhat more common than in Australia. However, there are quite a high degree of social variation in both countries and these dialects can be divided into ‘mild’ and ‘broad’ accents. Though the English accents of both countries are phonologically very close to Received Pronunciation, RP, the phonetics of the ‘mild’ and ‘broad’ variations differ considerably. While the ‘broad’ accent is considerably different from RP, the ‘mild’ accent is fairly close to RP and is mostly spoken by older people and people high up in the social scale (Trudgill & Hannah, 2008)

3.2 South African English

Only around 3 million South Africans have English as their native language which makes them a minority since South African English is widely known and mostly used as a second

language by people with other languages as their mother tongue, for example different Bantu languages or Afrikaans. South African English can be divided into three varieties; cultivated, general and broad. The cultivated variety is mostly associated with the upper class and is closely related to RP. The general variety is mostly spoken by people in the middle class and the broad variety is associated with the working class and resembles second-language Afrikaans-English.

Some of the characteristics of South African English pronunciation are for example the front vowel [i] as in *tin*, *bit*, *lip* and the schwa [ə] can generally be considered allophones of the same phoneme, /ə/, making the pairs *Lennon-Lenin*, *accept-except* and *scented-centred* homophonous (Wells, 1982). The /r/ is often a tap, which means that the tongue is flicked up against the roof of the mouth, interrupting the flow of air, or a trill, which means that the tip of the tongue vibrates in the airstream (Roach, 2001). South African English is a non-rhotic language, there are no /r/ in words like *car*, *start* and *dinner* and just like in RP the words *tune* and *duke* are pronounced [tʃu:n] and [dʒu:k] in South African English.

3.3 Australian English

Almost all native Australians have English as their first language, which means about 20 million people and considering the size of Australia, Australian English is remarkably homogenous (Wells, 1982). As mentioned above, there are several similarities between Australian English and South African English and just like in South African English there are in the Australian English three varieties, a cultivated variety, a general variety and a broad variety. The cultivated variety is used by about 10 per cent of the population and resembles RP, while the general variety, used by approximately 60 per cent of the population, and the broad variety, used by about 30 per cent, are fairly similar to one another with the exception of the diphthongs being slightly longer in the broad variety (Crystal, 1995).

Like most varieties of English, Australian English is non-rhotic but there might be a linking /r/ if a word that ends with a /r/ comes before a word that starts with a vowel, for example in *car alarm* the sound /r/ in *car* may occur. The main characteristic of Australian English is the vowel system and especially the diphthongs. For instance the word *see*, which in RP is [si:] is in Australian English pronounced [sei:], the weekdays, which in RP end with [-di] end with [-dei] (Trudgill & Hannah, 2008), *my* which is pronounced [maɪ] in RP is pronounced with a more open quality [maɪ] in Australian English. Generally the RP sound /ɪ/ is pronounced /i:/ in Australian English. Other characteristics are for example the sound of the weak vowels in weak syllables is generally /ə/ which makes the words *boxes* and *boxers* homophonous, both are pronounced /'bɒksəz/, the words *salad* and *valid* rhyme, both ending with /-əd/ and the suffixes spelt *-ate*, *-ness*, *-let*, *-id* and *-ist*, to name a few, are all pronounced with a /ə/ (Wells, 1982). Moreover, the vowels next to a nasal consonant tend to keep the nasality. The words *now* and *down*, for instance are often nasalized, particularly in the broad accent, which is a reason for calling the Australian English accent a 'twang' (Crystal, 1995).

3.4 Indian English

There are few people who have Indian English as their mother tongue which means that a vast majority of the speakers of Indian English uses English as their second or even third language. This also means that Indian English is very influenced by the phonology of the speakers' first language and that there are several regional varieties depending on both the speakers' native Indian language and where in India the speaker is from.

Some of the pronunciation characteristics of Indian English are for example that vowels which in RP are long, for instance in the word *nurse* [nɜ:s] are short in Indian English, thus [nɜrs], the RP diphthongs /ei/ and /ou/ as in *face* and *goat* are usually monophthongs

pronounced /e:/ and /o:/ in Indian English and there is in some varieties no distinction between /v/ and /w/, /t/ and /θ/, /d/ and /ð/. Most speakers of Indian English have a rhotic pronunciation, pronouncing /r/ where there is *r* in the spelling but their pronunciation of *r* is normally with a flap, /ɾ/.

However, the most noticeable feature of Indian English is the stress of words and sentences. Speakers of Indian English might put stress into syllables, which to a RP speaker would be weak and therefore unstressed. An Indian English speaker might pronounce the words *about*, *minister* and *mistake* like this [ˈəbaʊt], [mɪˈnɪstər] and [ˈmɪstek] (Wells, 1982). The sentences of Indian English tend to be syllable-timed instead of stress-timed, which most Englishes are. This means that suffixes are stressed and function words like *to* and *of*, which in RP are weak and unstressed, are in Indian English stressed as well (Trudgill & Hannah, 2008).

3.5 Scottish Accent

There used to be a standardized language spoken in Scotland called Scots which was used in literature and at the Scottish court but after the Reformation in the 16th century Scots has gradually lost its status as a separate language and has become influenced by Standard English. Nowadays educated Scottish people use a form of Standard English which is not particularly different from the English used elsewhere but the Scottish speakers tends to have a very obvious Scottish accent, the pronunciation of which is very different compared to most varieties of English.

The most noticeable characteristic of Scottish English is the fact that the accent is rhotic. This has the effect that fewer vowel sounds are needed in Scottish English than in RP. Several of the vowels and diphthongs in RP developed as a result of the language becoming non-rhotic in order to be able to differentiate between words like *soared* and *sawed*. However,

since the Scottish accent has kept its rhoticity fewer vowels and diphthongs are necessary. Most of the vowels in the Scottish accent are monophthongs except for the sounds /ai/, /au/ and /ɔi/.

Other characteristics of the Scottish accent are, for example, the sound /x/ which occurs in some specifically Scottish words, for instance *loch* [lɔx] and sometimes also in words like *night* [nɔxt], the distinction between words beginning with *wh-* and *w-*, as in *which* [ʍɪtʃ] and *witch* [wɪtʃ] and finally the frequent use of a glottal stop instead of non-initial /t/, for example in the words *better* and *whatever* (Trudgill & Hannah, 2008).

3.6 African-American Vernacular English (AAVE)

Many Americans of African-American origin, wherever in the USA they might come from, speak AAVE. AAVE is an accent, which emerged in the south of the USA where most of the people of African origin were located during the time of slavery. This is why the AAVE accent resembles the accent spoken in the south parts of the USA. After the abolition of slavery, some of the former slaves moved to other parts of the USA and naturally took their southern accent with them. Due to the relatively limited interaction between African-Americans and White Americans the AAVE accent has kept many of its originally southern features regardless of where it is spoken (Trudgill & Hannah, 2008).

Some of the pronunciation characteristics of AAVE are for example, the RP diphthong /aɪ/, which is usually pronounced as the monophthong /a:/, a word that begins with /ð/ like *this* is normally pronounced with a /d/ thus [dɪs] but inside a word or at the end of it /ð/ might be pronounced with a /v/ or /d/ thus *smooth* being pronounced [smu:v]. If the sound /θ/ appears inside or at the end of a word it might be pronounced as /f/ or /t/, *month* would therefore be either [mʌmf] or [mʌnt]. In a final position *-ng* is pronounced /n/, *singing* is pronounced [sɪŋɪn] but this is not the case in a one-syllable word, *sing* would then be [sɪŋ]. One noticeable

feature in AAVE is the final consonant cluster reduction, hence *hand* and *test* are pronounced [hæn] and [tɛs] and in consonant clusters in the beginning of words /str/ as in *street*, might be pronounced /skr/ by younger users of AAVE, thus [skrit] (Wells, 2008).

AAVE users tend to use *ain't* instead of RP *don't*, *am not*, *isn't*, *aren't* and *haven't* to name a few and double negation, for example *I don't know nothing*, is also a common feature. There are some grammatical characteristics of AAVE worth mentioning. For instance, the absence of the copula *be* in phrases like *She my sister* instead of the Standard English phrase *She is my sister* and *Who you?* instead of *Who are you?* and the same verb might be in the infinitive *He be five years old* instead of the Standard English inflected form *He is five years old*. Third person singular verbs in the present tense tend not to be inflected in AAVE, thus *She write poetry* instead of *She writes poetry*, which would be the Standard English form.

4. Results and discussion

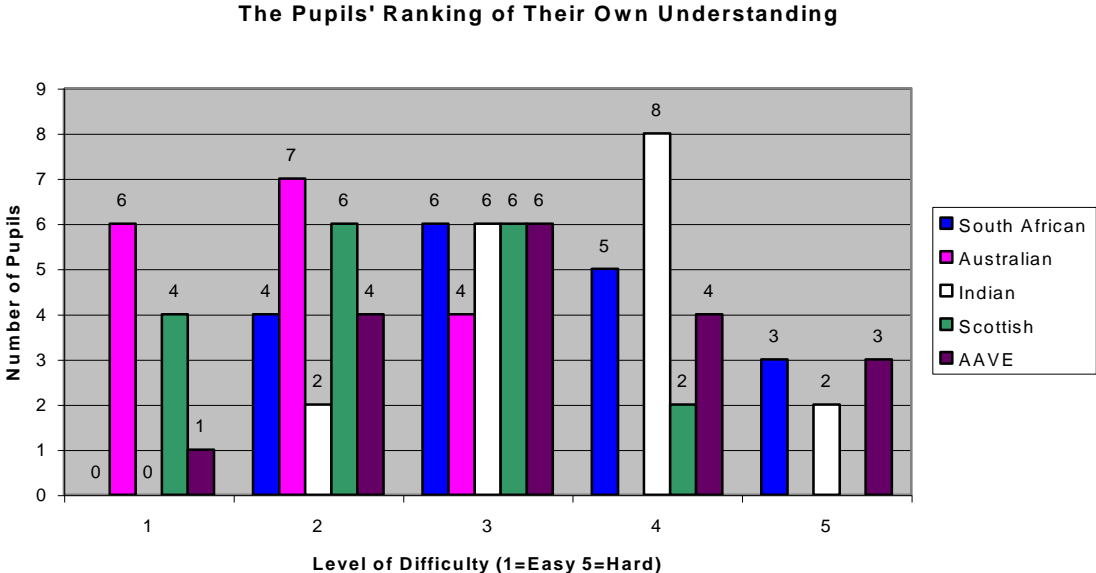
4.1 The pupils' ranking of their own understanding

When analysing the questionnaires it became clear that the pupils' general understanding of the different accents was good. They were in most cases able to retell what the stories in the audio tracks were about, but they had basically no idea as to where the accents were from, with India as the only exception. Even though the pupils were told that only accents from Inner Circle countries were used, they still placed some dialects as possibly spoken in France, Russia, China or South America.

According to the pupils' own ranking of their understanding of the accents, they found the Australian accent to be the easiest to understand with Scottish as a close second. The three other accents, the South African, Indian and the AAVE, seemed to be fairly equally hard to understand. However, the Indian accent must have been somewhat harder to understand due to the fact that five pupils were not able to tell what the story was about when told with an

Indian accent. This was surprising considering the fact that there were hardly any pupils who could not retell the stories told by any of the other accent speakers. It is also hard to know whether some of the pupils' ranking of their understanding is right, particularly when they have stated that an accent was easy to understand but have not been able to retell the story. That makes me question some of the pupils' rankings of their own understanding but at the same time their rankings are the only data available and that data is the basis of this study. One of the pupils did not do the ranking of the Indian accent, which might be due to forgetfulness or simply because the pupil did not know what to answer.

The diagram below shows how difficult the pupils thought the accents were to understand:



4.2 Comments about the dialects

When the pupils were asked to discern what it was that made the accent differ from the one they normally use, the pupils performed well above expectation since this is a type of question a university student might find difficult to answer.

In the following text the pupils' thoughts about the different accents and their features will be presented.

Here are a few comments about the South African English accent:

Example 1: 'They pronounce "R" more'

Example 2 : 'It's more hacky. They hack on the "R"s'

Example 3: '[...] They pronounce the words very hard, and sometimes leave out the last letter of the word'

It is obvious that the pupils have reacted to the speaker's r-sound. The text was read by a speaker whose /r/-sound was either a trill or a flap, which is common in South African English and might be what the pupil in example 2 thought sounded "hacky" or more accurately jerky. The fact that the speaker was not a native English speaker and consequently had a different intonation can also be an explanation for the jerkiness. As can be seen in example 3, one pupil also noticed that the last letter sometimes disappears, which it tends to do in non-rhotic varieties of English, for example if the words end with an -r, as in *car*. One pupil even commented that: 'It is not the woman's first language', which was very surprising but nonetheless absolutely true.

Out of 18 participants, 11 thought this accent was from Africa, 2 of which correctly specified South Africa.

These are a few of the pupils' comments regarding the Australian English variety:

Example 4: 'He uses british accent to speak'

Example 5: 'It's easy because it sounds normal like the text we been listens to'

Example 6: 'I use this kind'

The last two of these comments, example 5 and 6, show that the pupils in most cases could not tell the difference between this Australian accent and the Standard English accent. This is

probably due to the close resemblance between the two varieties and I suppose it is hard to identify the Australian variety if one is not familiar with a few of the distinguishable characteristics. This might be one of the reasons why 5 pupils thought this accent was from Britain and only 3 pupils thought it was from Australia.

This is what some of the pupils thought about the Indian English variety:

Example 7: 'It's messy'

Example 8: 'He speak werey mumly and don't say the hole word some times'

Example 9: 'It's hard to explain, they don't speak as "round" as Americans do...they speak more "up and down" in their tone'

Example 10: 'They talk with dark and light weighted words. The words getting some tops'

The first two comments, example 7 and 8, show that this accent was rather difficult to understand. Many of the pupils commented that the speaker did not speak clearly and that he spoke too fast, which might be due to the stress pattern of Indian English. It is harder to understand English when all the words are equally stressed and not just the most important words. The stress and intonation was probably what the two observant pupils in example 9 and 10 meant with their comments about the speaker's tone and that the words are "getting some tops". Since Indian English was not the speaker's first language it is likely that the tone of his English was influenced by his Indian native language.

Every pupil, with one single exception, wrote that this accent was from India. This might be due to the Indian accent being fairly easy to distinguish or it might be an effect of this test being carried out among teenagers who sometimes have great difficulties keeping some things to themselves, especially if they feel sure of knowing the correct answer. In other words, one pupil said out loud that the accent was from India during the listening comprehension.

Here are a few of the pupils' comments about the Scottish English variety:

Example 11: '[...] I don't think she pronounced the whole word or something like that'

Example 12: 'She speaks wavey (with an additional drawing of a wave)[...]'

Example 13: 'She stop to much and starts to quick and she says too much 'Ehhh' and she speaks a bit queit somtimes'

Example 14: 'It's round in some way'

Example 15: 'Hard to explain but it is almost the same as brittish english'

I think the comments in example 11-14 show that these pupils were not used to this variety of English which explains the reaction to the speed of the speech and the intonation. Due to the fact that Scottish English has some sound features that other varieties of English have not and lacks other typically English sounds, the diphthongs for example, makes the intonation of the Scottish English variety differ considerably from other varieties of English.

It is difficult to know what the pupil who wrote the last comment, example 15, actually meant. Obviously Scotland is a part of Britain but its accent is not really what is usually associated with British English. Surprisingly, not one of the pupils wrote anything about the rhoticity, the diphthongs or the vowel sounds. However, the most amusing answer of this study was found answering the question where the pupils thought this accent was spoken, namely: Pirate boats! Though, only one pupil thought this accent was from Scotland, 6 others thought it was from either Ireland or Great Britain, which are not very far-fetched answers.

These are a few of the pupils' comments about the AAVE variety:

Example 16: 'She talkes very long down in her trough. She "rolls" on the words'

Example 17: 'He spoke really slow and draw out every word as long as he could'

Example 18: ‘They speak in slowmotion and a little lik cowboys does’

Example 19: ‘Speak were slow and mumly’

It is interesting to see that the pupils did not seem to have any great difficulty understanding this AAVE accent since the speaker had the broadest accent of them all and consequently should be the hardest accent to understand. However, as can be seen in example 16 and 17, it was difficult for the pupils to discern the gender of the speaker, who was in fact a middle-aged woman. Furthermore, the speaker did speak very slowly and almost every pupil commented on that fact and not so much on other pronunciation differences although the AAVE accent probably differed quite a lot from the accents the pupils use.

Most of the pupils specified that the accent was from Texas which might be due to something they recently worked with or just a way to specify that they believed the accent to be from the American South. 13 pupils believed the accent was from the USA, which is absolutely correct since there is hardly any regional variation in AAVE the accent could have been from anywhere in the USA.

4.3 About the audio tracks

It might be difficult to record people’s speech due to the fact that it may not be as authentic as one might wish. It is very probable that the speakers become self-conscious about the way they speak and for that reason they might speak more slowly and carefully or they might simply read instead of speaking like they normally do. For two of the speakers of the ‘Comma gets a cure’ story, the South African speaker and the Indian speaker, it was a good thing that they slowed their speech down a little otherwise it would have been too hard to understand. Even if they spoke a bit more slowly, they did not lose any of the characteristics of their accents; they might even have pronounced them more clearly. However, I realised that by

dividing one story into three different parts I had unintentionally, in a way, provided the pupils with information that makes it hard to assess whether they actually understood an accent or not. For instance, when asking the pupils what the third part of the story was about they could answer that ‘It’s about a goose’ which is true but they had already heard that in the previous parts of the story.

It seems like the pupils thought it was more interesting to listen to the other two speakers, the Scottish speaker and the AAVE speaker, who simply spoke about their lives and families and where they all lived. The pupils had in these cases noticed more specific details of the speakers’ stories. I suppose that it is easier to relate to someone who speaks about their actual life instead of just reading a story from a paper.

4.4 The question of geography

The last question in the questionnaire concerned the geography of the accents and the purpose of that was in case the pupils did not know the name of the country or region they could circle the place on the map, if they knew where it was. However, the pupils focused a bit too much on the map, making the questionnaire a sort of competition with “right” and “wrong” answers. Some of the pupils became quite terrified as soon as they saw the map. Even though the students were told about the purpose of the map they were still eager to answer “correctly”.

As seen above the pupils understood the stories told with accented English but did not know where the accents were from. But the question is if they really have to know that and I do not believe so. If they someday meet a person with a heavily accented English it is more important to understand what the person is saying than being able to tell from the accent where the person is from.

5. Summary and conclusion

Being able to understand different varieties of English is something that is becoming increasingly important nowadays due to both globalisation and the mainstream media, which is always available and ready to report from anywhere in the world. It is therefore necessary in English language teaching to introduce different varieties of Englishes to make the pupils aware of and comfortable with different accents of English. Moreover, in the Swedish curricula Lpo94 and Lgr11, there are goals for the 9th grade about understanding speech even though it is regional in nature, which means that the pupils should have encountered different English varieties before leaving compulsory school. With this as a background, I wanted to see whether the pupils of a class in the 9th grade were able to understand a few common English accents. In order to do this, I conducted a study where 18 pupils got to listen to five audio tracks with speakers who spoke different varieties of English accents and then fill out a questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of basically four questions the pupils had to answer; firstly, what the speaker was talking about, secondly, what it was that made the accent differ from the accent the pupils preferably use, thirdly, how difficult the pupils thought the accent was to understand and fourthly, if the pupils knew where the accent was from. The results of the study were then analysed and it became evident that most of the pupils did not have any difficulties understanding the different accents. In most of the cases, they were even able to discern some of the pronunciation differences of the various accents. Obviously they found a few of the accents harder to understand than others but generally the pupils did well. This might be as a result to the English teaching of today where varieties of English accents are given a more prominent role, not only in the two curricula but also in textbooks and listening materials (Eggert, 2007). However, it would be interesting to see an updated study equivalent to Eggerts, since textbooks and listening materials probably have changed somewhat during the past few years. Another interesting topic for future research

would be to study where the pupils encounter different varieties of English, if it is through music, the Internet or other types of media and if they reflect over the fact that there are several different varieties of English.

After making this study, a few pedagogical implications have become evident. For instance, by using different varieties of English when teaching, the pupils will not only become more comfortable when listening to different Englishes but also more comfortable when speaking English. Hopefully, it might have the implication that the pupils understand that their speech pronunciation does not have to be perfect, they do not need to speak like a native English speaker to be able to make themselves understood. Their way of speaking English is a variety just like all the other varieties of English in the world.

To conclude, the pupils who participated in this study seem to understand speech even though it is regional in nature. That means that they have attained that particular goal in the current curriculum but they have really attained much more. They have attained the ability to understand and communicate with people from all over the world.

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Appendix 1

Accents and Dialects Questionnaire

Nr: _____

1. What was the story about? Write down at least five sentences about the story.

2. What is it that makes this accent differ from the English you use?

3. How difficult was this accent to understand according to you, on a scale from 1 to 5?
Please circle your answer.

Easy 1 2 3 4 5 Hard

4. Where do you think this accent is spoken?

5. Please mark the area where you think the accent is spoken on the map.

